The Builder.

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KIT WREN, as Dr. Spratt familiarly calls our great Sir Christopher (and it is pleasant now and then to see a genius in his slippers), was one of a band of men, the founders and early fellows of the Royal Society, whose names are world-famous and memories imperishable. He lived, too, at a turning point in English history, and witnessed events of no ordinary magnitude and importance,—saw the Restoration (and its vice), the burning of the City, and its rebuilding. He was himself a "miracle of a youth," a "rare and early prodigy of universal science;" the possessor of the most varied knowledge and powers, the perfector of the barometer, a profound astronomer and mathematician, a profuse inventor, the architect of St. Paul's, and a good man. "Sir Christopher Wren and His Times," then, is a taking title for a book, and Mr. Elmes has adopted it for a volume which he has just now published.* The circumstances under which it has been executed disarm criticism, and would of themselves lead us to aid in extending the sale of the work. We may, however, with justice say that the author has produced a readable, interesting, and instructive book. Precise it is not, and there will be plenty of critics to point out that by the Revolution of 1668, the author means that of 1688; that Inigo Jones died in June, and not July 1652; that the Great Exhibition may be called a microcosm, but not a "macrocosm," with other matters of this sort; but this is not the tone we are disposed to assume on the present occasion. What, then, are the circumstances, our readers will say? About seventeen years ago Mr. Elmes, an old practitioner, the author of some works well known in the profession, lost one of his eyes whilst surveying the shoals in the port of London, and in 1844 he became totally blind. During this privation his son, the architect of one of the finest modern buildings in the world, St. George's Hall, Liverpool, sickened in the high road to fortune, and found a premature grave in Jamaica. About three years ago surgical aid enabled him, "by the aid of magnifying glasses of great power, to read the strongly-marked characters of our old English black letter, and its cousin, German, and the bold characters of Hebrew language, but the Roman type was illegible." He chronicles the affection of his youngest daughter, who devoted her whole time to him, "the kindest of attendants and guides," and at the same time his "sole reader and writer;" and though he can now read large print in a very small diameter, and write thickly upon lines which can be felt, instead of always dictating as formerly, yet "it is slow, and available only by intervals, and totally useless for professional occupations." The picture is a touching one, and commands our sympathy, though we have no personal knowledge of the sufferer.

Wren was a marvellous character: rightly to appreciate, analyse, and illustrate his powers would demand a Wren;—"*Pour chanter un Auguste, il faut être un Virgile.*" Always at work;—an inventor at fourteen, and a philosopher before that, he produced results with wonderful rapidity. A reflecting dial, an instrument to write with two pens at the same time, a weather clock, a machine wherewith to write in the dark, his appointment as demonstrating assistant at anatomical lectures in Surgeons' Hall, learned essays, and Latin metrical essays, may be pointed to before he was sixteen. At five-and-twenty he filled the astronomical chair in Gresham College. Newton said, that of that age of geometers, Wren, Wallis, and Huygens were "*facilè principes;*" and of his 150 important architectural works, what do we say ourselves? We find him a constant attendant at "the club" in Wadham College, from which emanated the Royal Society, with Boyle, Hooke, Evelyn, and others, and always ready to join in what was going on.

While Wren was pursuing his studies, Inigo Jones, oppressed by troubles, died, and left the field open to him. Mr. Elmes's opinion on the state of architecture in England previously to the change effected by Inigo Jones, will serve as a specimen of the style of the book.

"The mixed anomalous art that was brought into England after the decline and fall of the Tudor style by ornamental and scenic painters from Flanders and other parts of the Netherlands, obtained the patronage of the wealthy portion of the community, from mere caprice, and to be in the fashion. This bad taste prevailed at court, and spread into the provinces from the middle of the reign of Henry VIII. till the time of James I. and the artists Zucchero and Holbein were its parents in England, and their royal patron Elizabeth its sponsor. Henry obtained part of his taste from the gorgeous pomp of the field of gold, when he met his great-minded adversary, Francis I. During this period, more than three-fourths of a century, this wild vine revelled in capricious disorder, and produced nothing but rank misrepresentations of Roman and Palladian architecture, the fruit of classical correctness engrafted upon a wild Flemish stock. This bastard style consisted of orders built upon orders, bows of all shapes, niches of every form, grotesque shells and rampant foliage, heraldic animals, 'gorgons and hydras and chimeras dire,' tossed about with reckless redundancy and picturesque caprice. Half-timbered houses of divers colours, 'black spirits and white, blue spirits and gray,' grinning horrible defiance to good taste, infecting alike our language and our art. It terminated its career, to show to what height architectural absurdity could soar, in the portal entrance to the Schools in Oxford, wherein the five orders of Italian architecture, caricatured in the worst taste, are piled upon each other, the brawny Tuscan at the bottom, surmounted by the loftier Doric, and with the matronly Ionic, the feminine Corinthian, and the hectic Composite upon the top, *stratum super stratum*, crown the absurdity. Yet these are the monstrous wonders that the copyists, degenerators, and precedent-mongers are dragging from their cemeteries, to pervert into schools, colleges, workhouses, baths, and wash-houses, ale-houses, gin-shops, and hospitals, whatever be their character; penal or jovial, scholastic or bacchanalian, all must wear this motley garb, to the utter destruction of characteristic architecture, and the stifling of inventive genius, the surest test of the artist-architect.

This aberration of taste received a mortal blow on the return of Prince Charles and his gay companions from their continental tour, who rubbed off their Elizabethan pedantry by foreign travel, and brought home a better taste in art. Vandyke and Rubens superseded Holbein and Zucchero, substituting nature and truth for dry and tasteless affectation; and the genius of Inigo Jones superseded the nameless architects of the Elizabethan style, which every man of refined taste must lament to see drawn from those cerements in which they had been quietly inurned."

The drama was one of the recreations of the scientific men of "The Club" and of Gresham College; and the young gentlemen of the present "Vanburgh Club" will be proud at finding written in an old quarto play, that belonged to Isaac Reed, the editor of Shakspeare's works,—"This is the play in which Sir Christopher Wren, our great English architect, performed the character of Neanias, before the Elector Palatine, Dr. Seth Ward, and many others, probably in 1652. Isaac Reed, 1801. The title of the comedy in question is 'Hey for Honesty, down with Knavery.' 'Translated out of Aristophanes his Plutus, by Thomas Randolph: augmented and published by F. J., London: printed in the year 1651.'"

"Wren," says Mr. Elmes, "is not our only architect who has diverted himself with Thespian sports. Vanburgh was not only the architect to the original Haymarket Theatre, but was joint manager thereof with Congreve, and contributed many very witty, if not particularly decent comedies for the gratification of the licentious audiences of his period. John Nash, also, who built the present exterior and the recent interior, was both an actor and an architect, delighting country audiences at Wrexham, with his Lord Ogleby in his younger days, and disfiguring the British metropolis in his elder days, with many instances of unrefined taste, some of which scarcely survived their perpetrator, who has given his name to the *Nash-ional* style of the early part of the nineteenth century. Charles Matthews, the younger, was originally educated as an architect under the elder Pugin,* and held an office conjointly with the writer of these pages, of surveyors to a fire-insurance company. Mr. Jones, the admirable genteel comedian of Covent-Garden Theatre, and since professor and teacher of elocution [now dead], was also of the architectural profession."

It is somewhat curious that Wren succeeded one poet in the office of Surveyor-General of the King's Works, Sir John Denham, and was superseded by another, though of very small calibre, William Benson, to make way for whom he was turned out of his employment. We need not, however, speak now of the annoyances which clouded the latter part of his nobly-spent life, or speak of those who rose,—

"While Wren, with sorrow, to the grave descends."

But we will look for an instant at that grave, and invite those who have the power to give it a more worthy aspect than it now has. Not many days ago we wandered over Wren's great work from the crypt to the cross; pondered over the scientific trussing that forms the dome (it is to be hoped it will escape the plumber's fire); grieved over the miserable condition of the interior of this part of the structure, and the want of colour elsewhere; shook our heads over the mystery of the whispering gallery, and sought the grave of the originator below. The dirty condition of that part of the crypt where his remains rest with others of his family, struck us forcibly; and we would suggest to our esteemed friend, the present architect of the Dean and Chapter, that the fitting arrangement of the small nook in question as a Wren-chapel, would be an elegant memorial of his connection with the work of one whose abilities he reverences.

Looking from the Golden Gallery of the Cathedral, other works by Wren are seen on all sides: we might as correctly say here, as in the Cathedral, to those who seek his monument,—"Look around." "Let any one,"

* "Sir Christopher Wren and His Times," with Illustrative Sketches and Anecdotes of the most distinguished Personages in the Seventeenth Century. By James Elmes, late Surveyor of the Port of London. London: Chapman and Hall, 186, Piccadilly. 1852.

* Many of our readers will hear with regret that Mr. Welby Pugin is in a state of mind at this time which prevents any attention to professional pursuits.—Ed.

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